

LILITH: MOTHER OF DEMONS OR FEMINIST IDEAL?

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Division of Humanities
New College of Florida
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Arts
Under the Sponsorship of Dr. Susan Marks

Sarasota, Florida
May 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to X and Leo for all your love this year. Sometimes I wonder about the memories we might have made together had there not been a pandemic that left us all so socially isolated, but I'd like to think that we made up for it this year. Thank you for all the boys' nights, for sharing your art and watching your movies with me, and for listening to me and letting me be open about my feelings. I love you.

To my parents David and Daun Cooper, thank you for supporting my decision to attend a school with no grades and to complete a degree in a major you might not have imagined for yourselves. Dad, I am inspired by your determination and diligence every day. Mom, thank you for your constant support. I may not remember going to your college graduation but I can't express how grateful I am that now ה"ב you'll also be at mine. Thank you both for supporting me in my Jewish journey.

I would also like to thank my Bubby and Poppop (ל"י) for my ancestral connection to Judaism and for demonstrating to me from a young age that Jewish life in the 21st century has to be adaptable, creative, community-oriented, and full of magic.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and mentorship with the guidance and support of the wonderful professors on my faculty committee. You have each supported my academic growth in various ways throughout my time at New College and I am so grateful to have gotten to know each of you and the inspiring work you do.

To Dr. Lopez, thank you for the consistent advice and feedback during the Religion Capstone as well as your feedback on my earlier work. I sometimes still look back on one particular evaluation for my final for your Intro class when I lack the confidence that my work will be good enough.

To Dr. Neggaz, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to collaborate with you on your Campus Conversations lecture on Medieval Islamic Medicine. In your classes I learned so much and even met my best friend. The classes I took with you were among my absolute favorites at New College.

To Dr. Marks, your past thesis students were right when they told me I was in for a fun year working with you. I honestly don't know where I'd be had I not taken Ritual Theory my first semester at the glowing recommendation from more than a couple alumni. Your guidance has completely reshaped the way I view writing and has allowed me to actually enjoy the process of exploring topics I am passionate about. Thank you for your patience, thoughtfulness, and inspiration each week. Your approach to teaching is truly the best New College has to offer.

Dedicated to our Jewish foremothers

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New College of Florida, 2022

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship Jewish women have had with the Lilith figure over the past millennium to better understand the social and cultural priorities of Jewish women in different historical contexts. By approaching pre-modern conceptions of Lilith through an analysis of childbirth amulets that were used explicitly to protect against her, this thesis establishes an early understanding of Lilith as a harmful entity with the specific aim of bringing physical harm to infants. A more contemporary focus on Lilith literature from mostly Jewish women scholars brings to light a Lilith with very different priorities, much more focused on themes of female autonomy and sexual liberation. Ultimately, by grappling with these seemingly contradictory perspectives on the same figure within Jewish mythology, I argue that by omitting either of these perspectives, we fail ourselves as contemporary scholars who seek a nuanced and holistic understanding of the ways in which Jewish women have survived and thrived while keeping the Jewish people alive over the past millennium.

Susan Marks

Division of Humanities

INTRODUCTION

“Who is Lilith? Or, more to the point, which is the true, the real Lilith — the rebel against tyranny or the wild-haired vengeful witch?...Is Lilith a model for Jewish women and if so, can only part of her history constitute the model?” - Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, “The Lilith Question,” 1976¹

I begin with this quote from “The Lilith Question,” first published in the premier edition of *Lilith* magazine in 1976 because the questions posed within this article remain, in many ways, unanswered nearly fifty years later. Feminist scholars have approached the Lilith myth over the past several decades with the intention of reinterpreting the myth in a way that fits in with the priorities and desires of women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but often without great effort to integrate the perspectives of the Jewish women of the previous millennium.

This thesis grew out of my past research on the gendering of sorcery in the Jewish Babylonian era, where I began to explore how Jews in antiquity understood and responded to the understanding that demons exist and seek to cause harm. I considered the ways in which the negative connotations of sorcery and witchcraft are associated with femininity. Simultaneously, in reading about constructions of motherhood in the medieval Islamic era, I became curious about the transition into motherhood for Jewish women in the Middle Ages as well. Through this, I quickly learned about early Babylonian iterations of a Lilith-like demon and the urgency to protect against Lilith explicitly during childbirth. As I first

¹ Cantor, Aviva “The Lilith Question.” *Lilith Magazine*, September 2, 1976.
<https://lilith.org/articles/fall-1976-29/>.

researched how the Lilith myth later evolved throughout the Middle Ages and into modernity, I began to question how characterizations of Lilith shifted so drastically in the modern era and particularly since the 1970's.

Current scholarship on the Lilith myth ranges from exploring the history behind how the Lilith figure emerged, citing primary texts like “the Alphabet of Ben Sira,” to contemporary feminist sources arguing for a reinterpretation of Lilith’s characterization. Most literature on Lilith centers around these very distinct themes. However, the vast majority of existing literature does not bridge the gap between the origins and early reception of the Lilith myth and how it has been interpreted in the modern era. Excluding hundreds of years worth of active engagement with the Lilith myth prompts several questions: How was Lilith understood during the Middle Ages and into the pre-modern era? How did this understanding shift, if at all? Who was engaging with this lore, and how did it affect the way that those subjects lived? It is apparent, as I discuss in this thesis, that understandings of the Lilith myth did not change much until the modern era. While this myth remained relevant within Jewish mythology and folklore, for Jewish women specifically it prompted a need to protect against Lilith during the processes of pregnancy and childbirth using protective amulets.²

Existing literature on the amulets used by Jewish women to protect against Lilith during childbirth is, however, very limited.³ Most literature on these amulets simply name

² See Glossary for amulet definition. See Chapter One for further discussion on amulets.

³ Though I use binary language (ie. “women” and “mothers”) when discussing the subjects who directly used childbirth amulets designed to protect against Lilith, I recognize that not all people who give birth are women and that contemporary birthworkers advocate for using gender-neutral language regarding people who give birth. Because womanhood has been so tied up with the roles of reproduction and child-rearing, especially in a pre-modern context, identities of womanhood and motherhood were traditionally linked and therefore all language in the thesis referring to birth is gendered.

their existence, often in association with other kinds of amulets, and do little to explore the nature of these artifacts with such a specialized function. This may be due to the fact that childbirth amulets were used in the birthing room, a primarily female space, where men were not often present unless a physician was absolutely necessary in the case of a medical emergency. Firsthand accounts from pre-modern women using childbirth amulets do not exist, especially dating back to the Middle Ages when their use was first popularized. This gendered experience of utilizing childbirth amulets is largely to blame for the lack of research on the subject. Furthermore, leading into the Enlightenment era, stereotypically masculine traits like logic and rationality became highly prioritized and any practices associated with magic or superstition received less focus. During the Enlightenment era, artifacts and practices associated with “magic,” like amulets, became further stigmatized. This, coupled with the ways in which Jewish communities adapted to modernity, resulted in few sources revealing details about the use of childbirth amulets, especially from the perspectives of the Jewish women who used them directly.

Therefore, this research bridges two existing corpora of literature, bridging the gap for the first time between what the use of childbirth protective amulets reveals about Jewish women’s understanding of Lilith pre-modernity and how that understanding shifted at the onset of the second wave feminist movement. The medieval and early modern understanding of the Lilith faced in the birthing room contrasts greatly with the descriptions of Lilith found in contemporary literature. The use of protective amulets against Lilith uncovers a vastly different understanding of Lilith as whole, as not just a character to be analyzed, but an entity who actively interacts with the physical plane with explicit aims of harming infants. Contemporary works, on the other hand, often implicitly or explicitly describe Lilith as an

allegorical female archetype invented by the patriarchy, who offers more to women in what she represents rather than what she actually is or does.

I wanted to reconcile the seemingly contradictory viewpoints, giving credence to both modern and pre-modern conceptions of Lilith based on the evidence available during both time periods. This thesis reveals that Lilith ultimately evolved from being understood as a powerful entity capable of bringing real physical harm to new and expectant mothers and their infants into an equally powerful but less corporeal archetype, symbolizing female agency and autonomy. The mothers who used childbirth amulets did so because that was one actionable way to obtain some sense of agency during the perilous process of giving birth. However, as the social and political needs of women evolved in the modern era, sexual equality, independence, and female autonomy were traits women began to see reflected in Lilith, the same figure who was understood as creating the dangers earlier women sought to protect against.

Though I want to point out how the Lilith-figure has served different functions for Jewish women throughout history, I want to be sure to especially honor the experiences of women since the Middle Ages up until the modern era. Their perspectives have been ignored almost entirely in contemporary scholarly works on Lilith, which tend to focus primarily on the Lilith myth and what value her characterization can provide to Jewish women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I propose that though the reception and function of the Lilith myth evolved drastically, Jewish women have nevertheless interacted with Lilith in ways that seek to strengthen their connection to Jewish womanhood, ways that resonated best during their respective historical contexts. Ultimately, by grappling with these seemingly contradictory perspectives of the same figure within Jewish mythology, I argue that by

omitting either of these perspectives, we fail ourselves as contemporary scholars who seek a nuanced and holistic understanding of the ways in which Jewish women have survived and thrived while keeping the Jewish people alive over the past millennium.

The first chapter of this thesis establishes that Ashkenazi Jewish women began using these amulets in an attempt to gain some control over their autonomy during the dangerous physical transition into motherhood. Here I show and begin to fill in the gap of a gendered lens missing from discussions about Jewish childbirth amulets by focusing on the experiences of the women who used them. After providing some background on the origins of Lilith, I explain how vulnerability to Lilith was understood as the primary underlying cause of danger during childbirth. Amulets are stigmatized in modern medical practice due to their association with magic. By also exploring the distinctions between magical and medical practice within a Jewish context, I establish that this socially constructed dichotomy would not have been relevant to pre-modern subjects who used childbirth amulets. These subjects were much more concerned with the effectiveness of the amulets regardless of whether or not they were more closely associated with either magic or medicine because that was the technology accessible to them at the time. This chapter provides the necessary context for the second chapter's closer discussion of childbirth amulets and what they indicate about Jewish women's understanding of Lilith.

Chapter Two includes a material analysis of several childbirth amulets, with special attention to each of the common elements present in two or more of the amulets. I divide each of these elements into two categories: those that garner protection via proximity to God and those that are strictly apotropaic. By focusing on the amulets themselves, I recenter the experiences of the Jewish women who actually used these artifacts, and also because the

physicality of ritual objects such as these serves as a reminder of the physical dangers the amulets were intended to protect from. The contents of the amulets consistently support the idea that Lilith was recognized as an entity worthy of legitimate concern, one that could have tangible and very real impacts on the health and lives of women and children. Though historians have wondered about the lives of these women, my analysis draws attention specifically to the ways in which the contents of these amulets resonated with Jewish women grappling with the transition to motherhood. This perspective on Lilith, though it persisted with little variation for several centuries, has seldom been effectively reconciled with the perspectives of contemporary feminist Lilith literature.

The third and final chapter puts into conversation the perspectives of Jewish women throughout history who have sought to protect against Lilith with the new corpus of Lilith revival literature. I define the Lilith revival as the contemporary literature and media depicting and discussing the Lilith myth, reinventing it to fit in with the needs of the modern era. I begin with two influential Lilith revival texts, “The Coming of Lilith” and “The Lilith Question,” respectively. I critique these texts to the extent that they focus on reimagining Lilith entirely without fully accounting for earlier perspectives on her. This does not discount their scope of influence, however, as supported by the Lilith revival texts they inspired. These two texts in particular as well as those that followed had an undeniable impact on Jewish women over the past several decades. By providing an allegory that did and continues to resonate with Jewish women who seek female representation in Jewish mythology, many continue to look to reinterpretations of the Lilith myth for a Jewish female archetype who is independent, sexually liberated, and powerful in her own right.

Though they contrast greatly, both of these perspectives hold, or have held, a strong cultural significance to Jewish women in their respective contexts. This work does not intend to place any one interpretation of the Lilith myth over another, but rather, draws attention to the earlier perspectives so largely unacknowledged in contemporary literature. Before we can acquire a more holistic conceptualization of how Jewish women have sought meaning in the Lilith myth throughout history, I provide further background on the use of childbirth amulets and the origin of Lilith in Jewish mythology.

CHAPTER ONE: JEWISH WOMEN AND PROTECTIVE AMULETS

INTRODUCTION

For hundreds of years, Jewish women have utilized protective amulets before going into labor and in the days and weeks following the birth of their children, in order to protect themselves and their newborns from both physical and spiritual threats to their health and well-being. Limited research exists regarding the use and perceived efficacy of such protective childbirth amulets. Much of the existing literature on the subject comes from a select few scholars, including Shalom Sabar and Yuval Harari.⁴ They contribute to the subject by explaining how the challenges that come with the child birthing process yielded a variety of Jewish folk beliefs and traditions. They closely analyze existing Judaica collections and focus specifically on individual amulets and their contents. Their work references Jewish demonology, motivating the ritual use of childbirth amulets. Nevertheless, most existing research on such amulets lacks a sufficiently gendered lens, something I aim to provide with my own research. While feminist scholars have interpreted Lilith mythology through a gendered lens, Lilith's influence cannot be separated from the ritual of using childbirth amulets. Ultimately in this chapter I argue that Ashkenazi Jewish women used these amulets in an attempt to gain some control over their autonomy during a crucial rite of passage into motherhood, made dangerous by vulnerability to Lilith, and I aim to fill in the gap that the gendered lens missing has left in discussions about Jewish childbirth amulets,

⁴Avizohar-Hagai, Chen, and Yuval Harari 2019, 335–50; “Shalom Sabar 2002, 670-722.

including explorations of the distinctions between magical and medical practice within a Jewish context.

This first chapter focuses on the human experience of the terror of childbirth and the experiences of Jewish mothers throughout history who used the technologies available to them—protective amulets—in order to protect themselves and mitigate some of the risks involved in childbirth. I begin with an explanation of what I mean when I refer to protective amulets used during and after childbirth, followed by an explanation as to why there is an inclination for Jewish mothers to protect themselves from both natural and supernatural threats to their health and well-being. I then present a history of the Lilith myth, drawing a connection between the myth and the use of apotropaic objects. Before moving on to the next chapter, focusing specifically on amulets, I explain the fluid boundaries between magic and medicine, arguing that regardless of which category amulets may fall into, they function as an accessible technology to those seeking protection for themselves and their infants. It is important to frame the use of amulets in this way because regardless of modern stigma around “magical” objects, these tools were understood as reliable, and that perceived reliability ultimately proved more important than the forces which actually made them effective.

WHAT ARE AMULETS?

There exists a long history of protective amulets among Jewish communities. When I speak of amulets, I adopt Michele Klein’s definition, which refers to objects that are believed to have special beneficial powers, such as the power to protect against misfortune and danger, to heal, to calm a stormy sea, or to increase a person’s success in business. When issued by a religious expert to secure

divine blessing in human affairs, it becomes a theurgical tool and an object that has religious importance because it is associated with holiness.⁵

While rather broad, this definition includes amulets used for various purposes, not just for protection, such as the childbirth amulets. This definition also appears to include objects imbued with sympathetic magical properties, wherein the object in question is itself associated with holiness, and its presence alone benefits those within its vicinity, and additional ritual action is not necessarily required. This definition may also extend to ritual items like *tefillin* or *mezuzot*, which are part of daily ritual practices for many Jews.⁶ However, neither are generally considered amulets although they do possess apotropaic properties, that is, they defend the user from evil, including threats of supernatural or demonic origin.⁷

Amulets serve either to increase prosperity or to protect against danger, regardless of whether the threat comes from physical ailments, environmental dangers, sorcery from another person, or other supernatural threats like those of demonic origin. The Hebrew word for amulet or talisman, *kemi'a* (pl. *kemi'ot* or *kemi'in*), roughly translates to “to bind,” perhaps coming from the Arabic root meaning “to hang.”⁸ This refers to how some Jewish amulets function as jewelry, such as those worn as a necklace or around the wrist, or how many textual amulets, including the majority of those used as childbirth amulets, were more commonly hung upon the wall in the birthing room or even laid underneath the parturient’s pillow.⁹ Placing the amulets so close to the parturient during this medically risky transition

⁵ Klein 2013, 26.

⁶ See Glossary for further clarification.

⁷ Posner 2007, 121.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Klein 2013, 26-27.

served to fulfill the function of protecting mother and child during labor itself, though often textual amulets remained displayed on the wall for weeks after the birth of the child. Because popular belief held that Lilith could bring illness or death to newborn males for up to eight days and newborn females up to twenty days after their birth, protection for a time period following birth was crucial.¹⁰ During the month-long lying-in period wherein the parturient rested and recovered, she would be at risk as well. Thus amulets were a crucial element in the room in which mothers and infants stayed post-partum, in essence framing this transition for the mother much like a picture upon the wall. Talmudic mentions of amuletic use reveal two primary physical forms: written amulets made of parchment and inscribed with quotations, and what are called *kame'a shel ikrin*, made from the roots of specific plants, much like medicine bags.¹¹ While both amuletic forms have continued in use into the modern era, more potential for a comprehensive study revolves around written amulets, which have been preserved more efficiently and, in many cases, have maintained consistent textual elements over several centuries.

JEWISH WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE WITH CHILDBIRTH AMULETS

Though Jewish womens' firsthand experiences with and perception of childbirth amulets from the Middle Ages into the early modern period received little documentation, I emphasize the importance of women using amulets during their pregnancy and labor as a way to protect against physical and supernatural dangers. Existing literature does not reveal whether some Jewish mothers initiated amuletic practices for themselves, but midwives did

¹⁰ Folmer 2007, 42-43.

¹¹ Posner 2007, 121.

play a clear role in their application at specific points during labor.¹² One early modern memoir from Rabbi Pinhas Katzenellenbogen reveals that rabbis established the requirements for the presentation and administration of childbirth amulets, but midwives directly offered prayers and applied amulets and other folk remedies during the time of labor to protect mother and newborn in the absence of rabbis.¹³ The social and religious roles midwives historically played have often been overlooked more than their role as medical experts on women's health. Midwives' ability to form more personal connections with new mothers than rabbis were able to indicates that women may have had a more thorough understanding of the implications and use of childbirth amulets than they would have had if only the rabbinical authority had imposed the practice onto mothers. Because midwives played a mediating role between mothers and religious or ritual authority and because research shows that the use of such amulets was incredibly commonplace among Jewish women in Europe beginning in the Middle Ages, regardless of women's individual experiences, one can assume that this ritual strongly impacted how women thought about birthing and the transition into motherhood.

Furthermore, looking at the ideal mother figure according to Jewish tradition through biblical motherhood archetypes as well as commonly held beliefs referenced in Talmudic literature may reveal tensions between the pressures faced by expectant mothers and the realities of what they could realistically do to directly protect themselves and their children. Exodus Rabbah, dating from the 10th-12th centuries CE, reveals some rabbinic beliefs held regarding pregnancy and motherhood. In reference to Yocheved, mother of Moses, Rabbi Judah said: "Her birth is compared to her pregnancy. Just as her pregnancy was painless, so

¹² Carlebach 2014, 15.

¹³ Carlebach 2014, 16-17.

was her giving birth—a proof that righteous women were not included in the decree pronounced on Eve.”¹⁴ In the minds of the rabbis, righteousness is directly linked to maternal health and wellness, pointing to Yocheved as an example of the righteous mother who was an exception to the punishment placed on Eve and the rest of womankind. One might next look to the matriarchs themselves—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah—who each dealt with their own struggles throughout the transition into motherhood. Infertility remains a consistent theme throughout the matriarch’s narratives, and scriptures emphasize both the power of God to open up their wombs and allow for these women to bear children, as well as a societal obsession with family-rearing and how central a theme fertility played in women’s lives.

Rabbinic literature discusses themes of fertility and healthy pregnancies, but rather than solely connecting good outcomes with righteousness, the earlier Mishnah implies that failing to perform mitzvot can be met with negative outcomes. “For three transgressions women are punished and die during childbirth: For the fact that they are not careful in observing the laws of a menstruating woman, and in separating challah from the dough, and in lighting the Shabbat lamp.”¹⁵ These three rituals are the responsibility of Jewish women specifically, indicating a clear connection between righteous womanhood and good outcomes in childbirth. Understanding that infertility and child loss is the direct result of failing to observe the three women’s commandments may have caused stress to mothers, who may have dealt with such challenges and blamed themselves even if they followed the commandments appropriately. Observing the laws of menstrual purity, *niddah*, which limit the times during which married couples may attempt to produce a child, may also have made fertility more difficult for some women. In this way, women must have grappled with the

¹⁴ 12.5.2 Exodus Rabbah (2:2) 1:18-26 in Schiffman 1998, 641.

¹⁵ Mishnah Shabbat 2:6.

obligation to perform women's commandments while simultaneously dealing with the cultural emphasis on motherhood.

This Rabbinic understanding of the dangers of childbirth do not insist that suffering and even death are always directly caused by sin, but may, as Gwendolen Burton points out, allow them and others to rationalize tragedy and the suffering that come from losing a wife or mother.¹⁶ The perspective of the mother, on the other hand, may differ. While not insisting that infertility, child loss, and the risk of not surviving childbirth are inherently divine punishments for sin within Judaism, this Rabbinic tradition may have reinforced the belief among expectant mothers that their transition into motherhood was entirely up to the mercy of God. Not negating the belief that God grants life and can take it away, this superstition could have also contributed to a desire to incorporate as many protective measures as possible, especially those whose authority comes from their association with holiness as is the case with childbirth amulets.

LILITH AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF USING PROTECTIVE AMULETS

Having acknowledged the underlying belief that God ultimately determines who lives and who dies, Jewish protective amulets both appeal to God while also actively protecting against harm, which often appears in the form of demons. Almost all Jewish childbirth amulets make some sort of explicit mention to one demon in particular, often multiple times and in various forms: Lilith. Even a quick look at the text of any amulet used for this purpose would reveal the importance of defending new mothers and infants from Lilith, so much so that one might argue that childbirth amulets do not exist to simply protect against the natural

¹⁶ Burton 2017, 123–35.

risks of giving birth, but rather, they exist to protect explicitly against Lilith—the underlying cause of physical harm that mothers and infants may face.

When depicted visually, Lilith stands out as a naked female with long, disheveled hair, wings, and sometimes owl feet. Lilith, or any of her demon children I refer to as liliths, aim to cause illness, seduce married men, attack both men and women, and kill children.¹⁷ While this imagery has persisted to this day as the most popular way to depict Lilith or her demon children visually, her characterization has only begun to shift over the past 50 years or so.¹⁸ The earliest evidence of a being similar to Lilith dates back to ancient Sumer with the *līlītu*, who was also a desert-dwelling demon cast out by Gilgamesh in *Gilgamesh and the Netherworld*, a Sumerian poem that was later translated into Akkadian and is now included in Tablet 12 of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written between 2100 BCE-1200 BCE.¹⁹ Scholars debate whether or not the *līlītu* are an early iteration of the Jewish conception of Lilith or an older caste of demons with similar characteristics that may have lent themselves to Judaism over time. Either way, the entirety of the Lilith myth is definitely a post-biblical development. The Tanakh only mentions Lilith once, including her among the animals and beasts on God's day of vengeance for the nations:

*Wildcats shall meet hyenas,
Goat-demons shall greet each other;
There too the lilith shall repose
And find herself a resting place.*²⁰

¹⁷ Lesses 2001, 343-375.

¹⁸ See Chapter 3 for further discussion on the shifting contemporary perspectives on Lilith.

¹⁹ Jewitches. "The Origins of Lilith: Jewish or Not?" Accessed October 16, 2021.

<https://www.jewitches.com/post/the-origins-of-lilith-jewish-or-not>.

²⁰ Isaiah 34:14.

This verse does not describe Lilith, her origins, or her motivations, but it does indicate her association with wild beasts and demons, cast out from civilization. We can not ascertain from this biblical reference alone that a Lilith narrative existed at this point, but the associations around her name here do resonate with later, more complete attempts at an origin story.

Rabbinic literature includes some mentions of Lilith, including instances of infants or miscarried fetuses born with wings who “bore a likeness to Lilith,” as well as warnings against men sleeping alone to “avoid being seized by Lilith.”²¹ Brief mentions such as these make up most of the Rabbinic literature on the subject, though archaeological evidence reveals more about the extent to which Jews in the Babylonian era were concerned with demons, including Lilith in particular. Babylonian incantation bowls, clay bowls often inscribed with scriptural verses, have been found buried outside the doors of ancient Babylonian dwellings. Inscriptions on these bowls reveal their intended functions, which most commonly included protecting those within the home, whose names are noted on the inscriptions, from sorcerers who may have wished to do them harm or from demons. Though these inscriptions mentioned multiple classes of demons, they most often mention liliths, referring to Lilith herself or to her demon children. The frequency at which Babylonian Jews repelled liliths through apotropaic means indicates that they either encountered liliths more frequently than any other type of demon, or that liliths occupied more space in the consciousness of Babylonian era Jews.

Later pseudepigraphical literature, namely the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (ABS), expanded upon the Lilith myth in much greater detail. Falsely attributed to second century sage Ben

²¹ Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 24b, BT Shabbath 151b. Ruah–Midbar Shapiro 2019, 149–63.

Sira, the ABS actually started to become popularized beginning in the eighth century CE.

This text, more than any other, disseminated a consistent and detailed Lilith myth throughout medieval Ashkenaz.²² The ABS includes the earliest known descriptions of several elements of the story of Lilith that have largely continued into modernity, including the understanding of Lilith as the first Eve, the first woman created in Genesis, and Adam's first wife, before Eve. Lilith's status as the first Eve comes from a discrepancy in Genesis. "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."²³ This first explanation of the creation of the first people includes no names, but does insist that humanity began with a male and female. However, Genesis 2:22 later introduces the first woman, given the name Eve. "And the LORD God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man."²⁴ This woman, made from the man rather than from the same substance out of which he was created, appears to be an entirely different entity from the one created in Genesis 1:27. Thus the Lilith myth first appears as an explanation as to why this discrepancy exists in Genesis. The story follows that God formed both Lilith and Adam from the same substance, and when it came time for them to have sex both wanted to lie on top. When Adam denied Lilith this sexual equality, she flew away from Adam by pronouncing the Ineffable Name of God.²⁵

After Adam confronted God, God sent three angels known as Sanoi, Sansanoi, and Semangalof to retrieve Lilith. She ultimately refuses to return to Adam, even accepting God's condition that 100 of her demon children would die every day as penance for not returning. At this point she proclaims, "I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the

²² Ruah-Midbar Shapiro 2019, 151.

²³ Genesis 1:27.

²⁴ Gen 2:22.

²⁵ Folmer 2007, 42-43.

infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.”²⁶ She herself provides the exception that she cannot do any harm if the three aforementioned angels are near the newborn “in name or in form.”²⁷ Any sort of approximation to the angels Sanoi, Sansanoi, and Semangalof, “the angels who are in charge of medicine” including their names or artistic depictions, therefore render Lilith unable to enter a house or harm any of its inhabitants.²⁸ The names Sanoi and Sansanoi can be found on apotropaic objects including incantation bowls dating back to the first century CE, indicating that their associations with Lilith or Lilith-like figures long predate the ABS. Nevertheless, this medieval text popularized the myth, including that the names of the angels written on amulets could protect the user from Lilith, throughout Europe. This is why the names or depictions of the three angels became a central element to Jewish childbirth amulets.²⁹

Later in the Middle Ages Lilith becomes more widely known as the mother of demons. As Kabbalistic literature spread outward from Spain, Lilith also became increasingly associated with sexual transgressions. The Babylonian Talmud hinted at this: “Rabbi Ḥanina said: It is prohibited to sleep alone in a house, and anyone who sleeps alone in a house will be seized by the evil spirit Lilith.”³⁰ The Zohar expands further, however.³¹ During the Middle Ages, not honoring *halakha*, Jewish law, regarding sexual prohibitions, became an explanation for Lilith’s presence. This could include men ejaculating in vain, who

²⁶ “The Alphabet of Ben Sira” 1998, 184.

²⁷ Ruah–Midbar Shapiro 2019, 152.

²⁸ “The Alphabet of Ben Sira” 1998, 183.

²⁹ For further discussion of the inclusion of the angels on amulets as well as other central elements to Jewish childbirth amulets, see Chapter 2.

³⁰ Shabbat 151b:10.

³¹ Zohar 1:148b.

then become vulnerable to her attacks because they “strayed after her” and “fornicated with her”³² The figure of Samael became more widely known as her consort, though he was not the father of all demons. This title remained with Lilith, who would reproduce by using the rejected seed of human men to birth her demoness daughters, who would also go on to “squeeze lust, semen or even marriage out of men – as they dream, as well as when they are awake.”³³ Rabbis may have utilized the fear of vulnerability to demons to discourage men from violating *halakha* regarding sexual prohibitions, including ejaculating outside the presence of his wife. This explanation points to the human factors at play in the development of myth, but I would also like to point out how these behaviors contribute to the characterization of Lilith. By having sexual contact with non-consenting men as they slept, Lilith steps into the role of a perpetrator of sexual assault.³⁴ Though perhaps not her most prominent role, this is one that should at least be acknowledged by feminists who view Lilith as a symbol of sexual liberation.

Another text which includes descriptions on how to appropriately create amulets is known as the *Sefer Raziel HaMalakh*, or the Book of Raziel the Angel first compiled around 13th century Germany, though some sections appear to be centuries older. *Sefer Raziel* itself included a variety of mystical teachings, but the inclusion of a specific amulet inscription became widespread in the early modern period and also lent itself to the book being used as a sympathetic magical tool. This meant that while some Ashkenazi women used the amuletic recipe, others would use the physical copy of *Sefer Raziel*, placing it under the pillow of the woman in labor, so that the book’s power and authority might provide added protection as

³² Ruah–Midbar Shapiro 2019, 152.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Speaking solely in terms of her characterization, this is a violent role, and may be difficult to reconcile with modern feminist reinterpretations framing her as a feminist role model.

well.³⁵ Belief in the efficacy of amulets spread throughout Europe after the expulsion of Jews from Spain, so even though *Sefer Raziel*, for example, was first printed in Amsterdam in 1701, the legacy of the Kabbalists in Spain are largely responsible for specific birthing rituals spreading and evolving throughout the late Middle Ages into the early modern period.³⁶ As Raphael Posner notes, “The belief in amulets gradually diminished with the emancipation of European Jewry, although in Eastern Europe it remained widespread until World War II.”³⁷ The decrease in beliefs about amulets after the Shoah, however, may be connected to the lack of modern research on the subject, especially from a gendered perspective.

ARE AMULETS MAGIC?

A contemporary reader may be surprised to read of amulets being used in a medical context, especially since the onset of modernization and growing secularization movements which condemn magic for its lack of rationality. However, in historical contexts in which amulets constituted the bulk of the technology available to combat sickness or death, the boundaries between what counted as magic or medicine appear blurred. Childbirth amulets became popularized in the Middle Ages, and while the contemporary reader might understand them as magical, medieval users would have been more concerned with their efficacy over magical status. So what does it mean to discuss magic in the context of medicine or to discuss amulets as efficacious magical tools?

³⁵ Baskin 2007, 122. Including a Torah scroll in the birthing room could also be considered an example of sympathetic magic, with the power coming not from any specific verses but rather the scroll itself and all that it represents.

³⁶ Posner 2007, 121.

³⁷ Ibid.

When discussing broad topics including magic, religion, or science, one must first note that these are all socially constructed terms. As such, in the words of Henk Versnel, “magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts.”³⁸ It is not entirely fair to ascribe modern categories like “magical” or “scientific” onto ancient historical practices, so rather than trying to evaluate whether or not the use of childbirth amulets in previous time periods fell more into one of these categories than the other, I explore how those who engaged in this practice during various time periods might have understood or characterized this ritual themselves, albeit using modern language and categories that may still not entirely encapsulate these experiences. David Frankfurter’s research on ancient magic supports that the textual and archaeological materials which prove a “magical” tradition “do not themselves make any claim to be magic and so cannot substantiate—historically or phenomenologically—a definable category for magic for antiquity.”³⁹ This, however, becomes complicated when magic and religious ritual become intertwined. Early anthropologists like Edward Burnett Tylor and James George Frazer described magic as analogous to one another, at least in the sense that magic also rests on an empiricist approach. While I agree with early anthropological arguments that science and magic both “augment control and...diminish unpredictability,” I disagree with the tendency of these early anthropologists and others to focus more on ritual as symbolic and not as a series of performative actions imbued with serious intention.⁴⁰ Rather than giving a symbolic ritual, childbirth rituals involving amulets appear to have addressed (or were fully intended to address) real and tangible problems regarding the life and health of both mother and child.

³⁸ Versnel, H. S. 1991 177.

³⁹ Frankfurter 2019, 282.

⁴⁰ Wolfson 2001, 78–120.

Texts and manuscripts from the Middle Ages which focused on gynecology or birth in a wider context included “magical” elements, such as how the prominent practice of medical astrology determined what medical conditions a person was prone to later in life. Ron Barkai does briefly mention “magic” in the medical sphere in one of his articles on medieval Jewish obstetrics with the specific examples of stones, of tying agrimony to a woman’s thigh, pointing upward to draw out contents of the uterus and the use of talismans placed on the abdomen of a laboring woman as described in *The [magical] use of Psalms*, and of the use of apple-shaped vessels of aromatic herbs to help with an easier birth or expelling placenta.⁴¹ Barkai notes that many “magical” medical tools are not necessarily curative, but used for their powers of attraction. This points to the importance of intention within ritual and especially magical ritual practice, and also to the fluid boundaries between the causes for physical ailments. Though the contents of this treatise indicates a focus on magic, its function was largely medical, and the writing of later editions of the text indicate a certain level of reliability in the methods described.

Concerning the fragile boundaries between science and magic in the Middle Ages as well as the distinction between different kinds of magic, Irving Harris notes that from the twelfth century onward, Kabbalah came to oppose the largely Aristotelian philosophy and sciences developing in the intellectual centers of Jewish Provence and Spain. Significantly, Harris points out that magic was not easily distinguishable from scientific activity, the two mainly differing in terms of their function. He distinguishes “*scientia*, that is, knowledge for its own sake” from “*ars* or *techne*, a skill mastered to exploit natural forces for the benefit or to the detriment of humanity,” the latter more accurately representing the magic of the

⁴¹ Barkai 1989, 96–119. *The [magical] use of Psalms* or *Shimmush tehillim* is a fourteenth century Jewish magical treatise which includes various methods for easing childbirth.

kabbalists. Though there are multiple functions for magic, practical systems like astrological medicine acknowledged and utilized by the kabbalists may not have been deemed unscientific. But this does not necessarily represent the Jewish perspective on systems like astrology. Harris notes that, “A pagan believes in the complete power of the stars to determine events in the world; a Jew acknowledges only a partial power for the ultimate cause rests with God.”⁴² With this distinction one can see that in the Middle Ages, magic served multiple functions and was not necessarily opposed to science as it is often viewed in a modern context. Magic was instead viewed as granting the practitioner varying levels of access to the divine depending on their own personal practice and religious perspective. On this note of distinguishing Jewish from pagan magic, Harris references 12th century Spanish Jewish philosopher Judah Ha-Levi, who discusses the efficacy of magic by comparing it to medical practice: “The difference between pagan and Jewish magic is illustrated by the difference between the fool dispensing medicine and the wise physician. One kind of magic is bad because it is not effective; the other is good because it works.”⁴³ According to Ha-Levi, efficacy is the factor that distinguishes “bad” magic from “good” magic. This clarifies some attitudes towards when it may be appropriate to appeal to more magical practices, and prompts further discussion about which practitioners are deemed “good” due to various factors involving their identity and social standing.

Like other scholars, Sharon Faye Koren also asserts that science and religion were “inextricably intertwined” during the Middle Ages.⁴⁴ Koren demonstrates the inseparability of science and religion by noting how religious authority used scientific theories to support

⁴² Harris 1995, 25.

⁴³ Harris 1995, 35.

⁴⁴ Koren 2011, 98.

theological or religious legal arguments. In addition, she notes how Kabbalah developed amidst the reintroduction of Galen and Aristotle in the Latin West thanks to the Islamic translation movement.⁴⁵ Koren expresses the nuances necessary in conversations about magic and medicine, yet she aims to provide a gendered perspective missing from the work of her predecessors such as Harris. Around the time childbirth amulets became popularized in the Middle Ages, Koren notes, most Europeans associated care for the body with care for the soul. Within this perspective, medicine acted as a positive force on the soul, and therefore protection against negative forces on the body functioned to protect the soul as well. If positive influences on the soul (ie. prayer) could affect the body as well as the soul, then one could expect negative external forces (ie. demons) to possess the capacity to impact the body just the same. Assessing the extent to which protective amulets possess magical properties and the extent to which the medieval users of such amulets would have perceived them as magical when their use was so often linked to the now-medicalized phenomenon of childbirth is important in understanding the extent to which “magic” would have been considered a factor in medieval protective amulets.

The question of whether or not amulets possessed magical properties would not likely have concerned medieval practitioners. Given their practical use, the efficacy of any amulet used for medical purposes mattered far more to practitioners. But what constituted an efficacious amulet? According to the rabbis, certain amulets may have been prohibited not because of their property or functions, but because of their illegitimacy. The Mishnah discusses the legitimacy of the scribe or creator of the amulet in question in the context of a larger discussion about what clothing is permitted to be worn on Shabbat.

⁴⁵ Koren 2011,

A man may not go out on Shabbat with a spiked sandal, [as will be explained in the Gemara.] And he may not go out with a single sandal when there is no wound on his foot. And he may neither go out with phylacteries, nor with an amulet when it is not from an expert, but rather it was written by someone who has not established a reputation as an expert in writing amulets that are effective for those who carry them. And he may neither go out with shiryon [armor], nor with a kasda [helmet], nor with maggafayim [armored legging]. These terms will be explained in the Gemara. And if he went out into the public domain with any of these, he is not liable to bring a sin-offering.⁴⁶

So according to the rabbis, the effectiveness of amulets is directly linked to the established reputation of the “expert” who creates them. But how does an expert establish a reputation? The Babylonian Talmud discusses this question:

With regard to the definition of an effective amulet as one which healed one person three times, the Gemara raises an objection. Wasn’t it taught in a *baraita*: Which is an effective amulet; any amulet that healed three people as one? The Gemara answers: This is not difficult. This, where it was taught in the *baraita* that the amulet must have healed three different people, is referring to proving the expertise of the man who wrote it. Once his amulets have proven themselves by healing three different people stricken with different illnesses, clearly the one who wrote them is an expert. That, where it was taught in the *Tosefta* that even if the amulet healed one person three times, is referring to proving that the amulet is effective in fulfilling its designated purpose.⁴⁷

Though the rabbis go on to debate whether the amulet must be used on three different people rather than the same person thrice, they largely agree that an amulet resulting in three positive outcomes renders the amulet effective and legitimizes the expertise of its creator.

CONCLUSION

So to an extent, the scientific process did actually play a role in establishing the effectiveness of amulets used in medical settings. Though amulets may be taboo in Western

⁴⁶ M Shabbat 6:2.

⁴⁷ BT Shabbat 61b.

medical settings today, those who used early amulets used systems of accountability to ensure that a reputable creator was responsible for making consistent, reliable tools. Through this discussion I establish that though modern understandings of magic and medicine hold these two concepts as antithetical to each other, these distinctions are indeed modern constructions. The perceived efficacy of amulets, established by both a reputable creator and three proven successful outcomes, legitimized amulets as effective tools appropriate for medical settings prior to the modern era. Amulets as medical technology was therefore generally accepted as a reliable technology available to those who used them. In Chapter Two I elaborate more on *how* amulets operated to protect mothers and infants during and shortly after childbirth, specifically by warding off the demon Lilith.

CHAPTER TWO: AMULETIC EVIDENCE OF A MONSTROUS LILITH

INTRODUCTION

Having established the parameters within which amulets were understood to be helpful forms of bodily protection, I can begin a close material and textual analysis of various specific textual amulets that were used by Jewish women who hung them on the walls of the birthing room. This chapter focuses on the materiality of early modern childbirth amulets, revealing that Jewish women understood the Lilith myth in the Middle Ages quite differently from how Jewish women have come to reinterpret the myth since the 1970's, which I discuss at length in Chapter Three. The similarities between so many different early modern amulets with the same function attests to their widespread use. That many of these amulets contain so many similarities also supports the idea that childbirth amulets produce effective results based on reliable mechanisms. Understanding the implications of the symbolism on the amulets informs the conclusions that can be drawn about how women understood Lilith and how to interact with her. I adopt Jules Prown's argument that material culture avoids using artifacts as passive evidence but rather actively provides effective historical and cultural evidence.⁴⁸ I include this section in my thesis because a focus on materiality can help to recenter the experiences of those Jewish women who actually used these artifacts, and also because the physicality of ritual objects such as these serves as a reminder of the physical dangers they were intended to protect from.

The particular visual and textual components of childbirth amulets I discuss support the centrality of Lilith in the traditional Jewish understanding of the risks associated with

⁴⁸ Prown 1982, 1.

pregnancy and childbirth. Because Lilith is traditionally understood as the underlying cause of harm related to pregnancy and childbirth, she must therefore be recognized as an entity worthy of legitimate concern that can have tangible and very real impacts on the health and lives of women and children. After a brief review of the history of amuletic use within Jewish contexts, I discuss common elements of childbirth amulets based on whether they appeal to protection from God or function strictly to expel negative entities.

Jewish textual amulets, though first popularized in the Middle Ages, remain in use to this day in some limited forms. As previously discussed, the use of apotropaic objects within Jewish communities goes back to ancient times, with some of the earliest depicting Lilith dating back to the Babylonian era. While Babylonian Jews utilized incantation bowls made of earthenware materials, the Jews of Palestine did produce amulets, made not of clay but rather on papyrus or thin sheets of metal.⁴⁹ Artifacts of this sort range from the third or fourth century CE to the seventh or eighth century, though not many survived. While metallic amulets are much sturdier, very few amulets written on papyrus have survived or remain legible simply because of their frail material composition. Because most textual childbirth amulets that appeared in the Middle Ages were written on paper and designed for personal use, these amulets also seldom survived into modernity. We know from the descriptions of amulets in *Sefer Raziel* for example that childbirth amulets were used and followed a specific visual and textual formula, despite the fact that few dating back to the Middle Ages were conserved effectively enough that they can be studied. Moreover, textual amulets in the Middle Ages consistently included the same essential elements one can see on later amulets dating to the 17th-19th centuries. For this reason, I do not include amulets dating from the

⁴⁹ Bohak 2017, 175.

Middle Ages but rather early modern amulets that include many of the same elements. The textual elements of these amulets remained relatively unchanged because their purpose—to protect laboring mothers and their newborns from the demon Lilith—remained unchanged.

Using arguably “magical” objects in medical settings has precedent within Jewish history. Texts and manuscripts from the Middle Ages, such as *The [magical] use of Psalms*, included knowledge on gynecology or birth in a wider context.⁵⁰ Each of these practices served specific and direct medical functions using the technologies available to the physicians and patients who used them. While amulets may be used in medical settings, their function was often understood as indirect, impacting practitioners by appealing to higher powers rather than having a direct effect on the body.

Generally, most European Jewish childbirth amulets that were hung upon the walls of the birthing room were handwritten or printed on only one side of a piece of parchment, and often accompanied by illustrations.⁵¹ Some, like Figure 7 labeled at the end of the chapter, were hung on the wall by a string threaded through a hole in the parchment. This, combined with the fact that just one side of the parchment was adorned reveals that the contents were intended to be displayed. The value of parchment encouraged one to utilize as much space as possible if the contents of the page were strictly functional. While the contents of the amulets do pose very real functions, we know they were intended to be visible to those present in the birthing room in addition to Lilith, who would only be deterred after seeing the amulet in a visible location.

Some amulets presented illustrations as the focal point with various textual elements superimposed on the illustration, while others centered the text and included minor

⁵⁰ Barkai 1989, 111-112.

⁵¹ Sabar 2002, 679.

illustrations on the periphery. Eastern European Jewish amulets included imagery like the seven-branched menorah, stone tablets, geometrics, florals, and animals more often than the depictions of people more commonly found in Western European amulets.⁵² Artistic styles definitely evolved over the centuries, with earlier amulets from the Middle Ages containing mostly text and minimal artistic depictions while early modern Western European amulets started to incorporate more elaborate illustrations of human figures like Adam and Eve or of angels. Several amulets mostly dating from the early modern and modern periods reflect the variety of styles in Jewish childbirth amulets as well as the uniformity in certain textual and visual elements that function either to garner protection from God or to explicitly repel Lilith.

According to the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (ABS), the most important aspects to include in a childbirth amulet are the names of the three angels *Sanoi*, *Sansanoi*, and *Semangelof*, in name or in form. Tools that could be considered “magical,” Barkai notes, are not necessarily curative on their own but are useful due to their powers of attraction.⁵³ In the case of these particular amulets, proximity to God carries a positive function of added protection while text that banishes Lilith, understood as a harmful entity, carries a negative function of expulsion. Visual and textual elements of childbirth amulets serve either to invoke God directly for the protection of the user or serve more apotropaic functions, though both are necessary in some form. While later amulets might occasionally include artistic illustrations that are purely

⁵² Ibid., 683.

⁵³ Barkai 1989, 111.

decorative, it is between these two categories that the majority of visual and textual elements fall.

PROTECTION VIA PROXIMITY TO GOD

Names of Angels

The most common text one might find on an amulet of this sort are the names of the three angels *Sanoi*, *Sansanoi*, and *Semangalof*, which originates directly from the myth as described in the ABS. After fleeing the garden of Eden, Lilith proclaims that she was created only to cause sickness to infants and negotiates with these angels that they may be spared if she encounters the angels “in name or in form,” hence the inclusion of the written names of the angels, artistic representations, or both, on so many amulets. Because this is one sure way to repel against Lilith, the written or artistic representations of the three angels can often be found at the top or in the center of many amulets.

Figures 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 all contain the Hebrew text “סנוי וסנסנוי וסמנגלוף,” (*Sanoi and Sansanoi and Semangalof*) the names of the three angels, in prominent script.⁵⁴ Figures 4 and 6 also depict their likenesses, which could function on their own to cast out Lilith. Including both the text and images may double down on this protective function, however it can also serve some decorative functions, seeing as the amulets would have adorned the walls of the birthing room.

⁵⁴ Sabar 2019, 111-133.

Adam and Eve

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 all feature the names of Adam and Eve, or אדם וחוה (*Adam v'Chavah*) in Hebrew displayed prominently, either in the center and/or top of each amulet. Figure 1 includes the most detailed illustration of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, with both figures posed on either side of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the serpent coiled around it facing Eve. This is certainly the most decorated amulet within this selection, and though it qualifies as an amulet based on the text and intended use, this particular amulet would have been proudly displayed upon the walls of the birthing room as it depicts other biblical scenes as well. Figure 2 is almost exclusively textual save for some floral adornments on each of the four corners of the page. Rather than including the names of Adam and Eve on their own, this amulet incorporates the names into the full phrase, “אדם וחוה חוץ לילית,” (*Adam v'Chavah Chutz Lilit*) meaning “Adam and Eve excluding Lilith,” or, “out Lilith.” This command invokes the origin myth out of which the first man and women were created, reinforcing the opposition between the first and second “Eve,” as it were. Adding the phrase “*chutz*” before Lilith’s name is understood to literally cast her out as well. Figures 2 and 3 include not only the names of Adam and Eve, but also the names of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. Contrasting the matriarchs including Eve here in opposition to Lilith highlights her role as a destroyer of children rather than one who bears children. The invocation of these names may also invoke a closeness to God by proxy due to their close connections to God, thereby adding a positive layer of protection to the user. Alluding to the Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs also recenters the significance of the continuation of the Jewish people throughout the childbirth process. Many mothers may have also related to the matriarchs' struggles with infertility

before God opened up their wombs, and so including their names on an amulet can serve as a reminder of God's role in the creation of new life as well.

Names of God - The Tetragrammaton and "Shadai"

Using any name of God appeals to the divinity associated with them. While the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of God, is inarguably the most holy and powerful out of all the names of God within the Jewish tradition, it is not necessarily the most common name found in the majority of childbirth amulets. An amulet may prominently display the Tetragrammaton, as seen in Figure 5 directly above the image of the menorah. One may also note that only after uttering the Tetragrammaton, according to the ABS, does Lilith sprout wings and fly away from the garden of Eden, indicating both the sheer power of uttering the name as well as the ways it could be misused by threatening forces.⁵⁵ However, "אל שדי" (*Shadai*) is found much more commonly on amulets. Sometimes written out as "אל שדי" (*El Shadai*), "The Almighty," in other contexts, amulets displaying the name *Shadai* present the word in a central or otherwise prominent location. One can see this exemplified in Figure 1, the last line of central-aligned texts in Figure 2, in the center-aligned text underneath Psalm 121 in the box in Figure 3, and within the hexagram or Star of David in Figure 6.

Star of David

The recognizable Star of David or hexagram is a common visual motif found in Jewish amulets. Seeing any text within the hexagram may hold additional significance to the meaning and function of the text itself. Figure 3 contains two hexagrams on either side of the

⁵⁵ ABS 1998, 184.

central box containing the image of the hand. Other amulets may center symbols like this more prominently. In Figure 5 a hexagram lies within a circle, containing text like “*Adam v’Chavah Chutz Lilit*” in Hebrew, or “Adam and Eve Out Lilith,” emphasizing Adam and Eve’s opposition to Lilith in the context of the amulet. Encircling these symbols are images corresponding to the months of the year according to the Jewish lunar calendar. Figures 5 and 6 include examples of micrography, an art form using Hebrew letters to outline representations of other symbols, like the menorah at the bottom of Figure 5 or the hexagram at the bottom of Figure 6. In the center of the hexagram in Figure 6 is the name of God “Shadai.” Symbols like the hexagram, as with circles or squares, are enclosed shapes that function in this context to either block malevolent forces or to enhance the power of the text associated with the symbol.⁵⁶ Therefore, when within the confines of a hexagram, which already has symbolically significant associations with its multiples of three, the power of the name of God is enhanced even more.

Psalms 91 and 121

Psalms have been recited for healing purposes, protection, and good luck for centuries. Childbirth amulets are most likely to include sections of either Psalm 91 or 121. One might only find one verse at a time, such as Psalm 91:5 (“You need not fear the terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day”). I agree with the scholars who argue that Psalm 91 in a medieval context implicitly refers to Lilith, but it has come to be recited in other contexts as well.⁵⁷ It would be more accurate to say that regardless of what “terror by night” initially referred to in Psalm 91, it has absolutely come to be one of the most prominent Psalms

⁵⁶ Dennis 2007, 53.

⁵⁷ Kosior 2018, 3.

recited for protection from all kinds of evil spirits in the Jewish tradition, especially those that cause sickness.⁵⁸ Psalm 121, also known as *Shir Lamaalot* functions to protect “against threats that come in the night.”⁵⁹ Psalm 126 could also be used for protection during childbirth as a Song of Ascents, though it is less common than Psalm 121. Other Psalms associated with reproductive health include Psalm 128, which could be worn by pregnant women as a pendant for protection throughout the pregnancy, and Psalm 127, intended to be worn by infants during the first several days following birth.⁶⁰ These additional examples attest to belief in some specific uses of Psalms in daily life, as well as the more specific association between reciting Psalms and ensuring good physical health.

STRICTLY APOTROPAIC

Chutz Lilit

Literally “out Lilith,” this phrase calls to cast out Lilith specifically. Commonly preceded by the names of Adam and Eve, when combined this phrase not only casts out Lilith in particular, it also contrasts Lilith to Adam and Eve. Figures 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 all specifically combine these phrases to say “אדם וחוה חוצ לילית,” (*Adam and Eve chutz Lilit*) or “Adam and Eve out Lilith.” On most amulets this can be found in the first line of text or displayed prominently centered or at the top of the parchment. In Figure 4, this phrase is written above illustrations of the three angels while Figure 5 includes the text in the circle central to the image, around the hexagram. Figure 6 differs only slightly, instead saying “אדם וחוה חוצ לילית חוה ראשונה,” (*Adam v'Chavah chutz Lilit Chavah Rishonah*) or “Adam and Eve

⁵⁸ Dennis 2007, 109.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The Magical Use of Psalms. Translated by Uri Raz.

out Lilith the First Eve.” This would also be an acceptable or common name for Lilith though it does not appear in every amulet. As it appears as one of the first Hebrew phrases on so many amulets, this drives home the understanding that the childbirth amulet intends not just to protect those vulnerable during labor and during the first crucial days of life, but specifically to protect from the demon Lilith, consistently contrasted to Adam and Eve, the more suitable archetypes for Jewish parenthood.

Kera Satan

Often following one of the names of God, “*Shadai*,” another apotropaic mechanism would be the phrase, “קרע שטן,” (*Kera Satan*) or “destroy Satan.” This may not refer explicitly to Lilith by name, but in addition to other phrases, it provides an added layer of protection. Including a name of God, a positive protective mechanism, in tandem with the negative protective mechanism of casting out harmful entities appeals to both functions of the texts. In figures 1, 2, and 3 we can see the Hebrew text “*Shadai kera satan*,” or “God destroy Satan.” This phrase is often preceded by the name *Shadai* in this way because, as Shalom Sabar notes in his analysis of Abraham bar Jacob’s amulet (Figure 1), “it is God who is called on to destroy Satan.”⁶¹ In Figure 3, the text is included within the box in the center of the amulet. Just as the hexagram or Star of David is made up of enclosed patterns, the enclosed box serves to enhance the power of the text within it, which in the case of Figure 3 also includes Psalm 121, Shir Lamaalot. Figure 7 differs slightly, including the text “*Kera Satan mekashefah lo t’chayeh*,” which references Exodus 22:17, elaborated on below.

⁶¹ Sabar 2019, 126.

Exodus 22:17

Another common phrase found on childbirth amulets comes from Exodus 22:17, “מכשפה לא תחיה,” (*Mekashefah lo t’chayeh*) translated as “You shall not tolerate a sorceress,” or “You shall not suffer a witch [to live].” Interestingly, the term translated as “sorceress” here refers not to humans engaging in magical activity, but rather a negative entity associated with the supernatural. Since late antiquity, rabbinic authority has associated women with sorcery and its negative connotations, and therefore this phrase has very gendered connotations regarding the evil forces at play. Therefore, when present on a childbirth amulet, the phrase “מכשפה לא תחיה” refers implicitly to Lilith and her evil deeds. However, when coupled with “*Kera Satan*” as in Figure 7, the phrase instead reads “*Kera Satan mekashefah lo t’chayeh*,” or “Destroy Satan permit not a witch to live,” implying that the Satan referenced throughout several other amulets is in fact connected with the witch/sorceress Lilith. It should be noted that this apparent prohibition on sorcery does not apply to the ritual of using amulets, a practice accepted or even encouraged by rabbis in the Middle Ages, although the modern reader might associate amulets with their conception of “magic” or “sorcery.”

CONCLUSION

Each of the childbirth amulets above share multiple similarities to other amulets in this selection, either through the shapes, symbols, and illustrations included, or through the Hebrew phrases which qualify them as effective protective tools. As I established in Chapter 1, these tools possessed a certain degree of reliability established by reputable creators and repeated success. Through this analysis of the elements which construct and define Jewish childbirth amulets, I demonstrate the inextricable connection between the demon Lilith and

the physical risk factors associated with childbirth. As the contents of the amulets define Lilith as the underlying cause of harm associated with the risk to mothers and to the beginning of a Jewish infant's life, so too does this reveal a widespread cultural understanding of this relationship. That many of the phrases and visual motifs on the amulets displayed above, which come from different areas in Europe, existed in earlier amulets dating back to the Middle Ages indicates that this cultural understanding of Lilith remained consistent for hundreds of years. In Chapter Three I go on to provide some context for newer conceptions of Lilith, and how they might aid our efforts to recognize varying perspectives of her.

AMULETS



Figure 1: Amulet, copper engraving on paper, engraved by Abraham bar Jacob, Amsterdam, c. 1700 17.5 x 20.9 cm.



Figure 2: Amulet, printed on paper,
printed by B. Zetsera, Lublin, 1893, 20.5 x
12.5 cm



Figure 3: Amulet, printed on paper, printed by Avraham Hadida, Casablanca, c. 1935, 32.3 x 31.6 cm.

Figure 4: Birth Amulet, printed in: *Sefer Razi'el ha-mal'akh*, Amsterdam: Moses Coutinho, 1701, 23.2 x 17.4 x 1.3 cm.





Figure 5: Amulet, parchment, handwritten and illustrated, Netherlands, 18th century, 31 x 22.5 cm.



Figure 6: Amulet, paper, engraved by Mordecai ben Jozi Sofer of Nitra. Nitra, 1831/32, 25 x 19 cm.



Figure 7: Childbirth Amulet D 23
 Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana , Library
 Special Collections, Universiteit van
 Amsterdam

CHAPTER THREE: IMAGINING A FEMINIST LILITH

I have previously touched on the general structure of what constitutes the Lilith myth, taken largely from the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (ABS), but in this chapter I focus on more contemporary interpretations of Lilith's origin story, with particular attention to how Jewish feminist scholars have interacted with the myth and reinvented Lilith traditions in entirely new ways. Beginning in the 1970's with a phenomenon I refer to as the Lilith revival, we see Lilith in elements of popular culture ranging from works of fiction to *Lilith* magazine to Lilith Fair, a music festival consisting of only female artists and female-led bands that ran from the summers of 1997-1999 and once more in 2010.⁶² While various kinds of media demonstrate how certain elements and themes of the Lilith myth resonated with a range of audiences beginning in the 1970's and onward, articles such as those written by Judith Plaskow and Aviva Cantor immensely influenced the dispersal of the revived Lilith narrative, even outside of essays and magazine articles.

In this chapter I focus on primary texts from the second wave feminist movement of the 1970's beginning with Judith Plaskow's "The Coming of Lilith" and Aviva Cantor's "The Lilith Question," followed by later scholarship inspired by these works.⁶³ I am primarily interested in these essays and others that specifically reinterpret the Lilith myth as an allegory of contemporary gender dynamics in heteronormative romantic and sexual partnerships. Though these scholars and others have contributed greatly to contemporary

⁶² Wikipedia. 2021. "Lilith Fair." Last modified December 23, 2021.

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Lilith_Fair&oldid=1061728812

⁶³ Cantor Zuckoff, Aviva 1976; Plaskow, Judith 2006.

feminist discourse in the field of religious studies and conversations in Jewish feminist spaces, I aim to critique the approaches of each respective scholar and the foundations of the arguments, the methodologies of which I argue may minimize the ancient context out of which the Lilith myth was born for the sake of applying the myth's narrative to contemporary issues. I would like to return the focus to Jewish women throughout history who have sought to protect against Lilith, and then put into conversation my understanding of how and why they did so. I examine how they portrayed Lilith as a demonic entity with the intent to do physical harm, and synthesize it with the common contemporary understanding of the Lilith-figure, one who is primarily literary. This literary figure may resonate with contemporary Jewish women seeking to gain a sense of autonomy over their reproductive rights or sexualities, pointing to analogous functions of Lilith over time related to women, who faced different challenges and sought autonomy over their bodies. Though I want to point out how the Lilith-figure has served different functions for Jewish women throughout history, I want to be sure to especially honor the experiences of women since the Middle Ages up until the modern era because their perspective has been ignored almost entirely in scholarly works.

“THE COMING OF LILITH”

Perhaps the most foundational contemporary feminist work on Lilith comes from Judith Plaskow, whose feminist scholarship laid the groundwork for generations of scholars since the 1970s to approach the field of religious studies through a gendered perspective, including a new approach to the Lilith myth through a feminist lens. Plaskow's 1972 essay “The Coming of Lilith” cleverly plays on the sexual dynamics at play in the original Lilith myth and takes the myth one step further, contemplating what kind of relationship Lilith and

Eve might have had if Adam had not driven a wedge between them.⁶⁴ Plaskow approaches the biblical figures with a sense of familiarity, humanizing them and arguably modernizing their interests and motivations. Ultimately, Plaskow constructs a narrative in which Eve and Lilith have the potential for a powerful allyship against God, who she describes as masculine-coded if not a literal man, and Adam, the very first man, who represents patriarchy as a whole. While not a particularly academic source, this essay, as later scholars point out, arguably catalyzed the Lilith Revival was incredibly impactful in the corpus of feminist Lilith literature.

“The Coming of Lilith” opens as Genesis does (“In the beginning...”) but rather than recounting the order of creation day by day Plaskow introduces Adam and Lilith straightaway, immediately setting this Midrash apart from Genesis because Lilith is not directly mentioned or described in Genesis. Adam commands, “I’ll have my figs now, Lilith,” calling back to the Jewish tradition that if literal, the “fruit” eaten by the first humans in the garden of Eden was likely a fig. The fig here also alludes to how the fruit, as a metaphor for sexual relations, was demanded by Adam as a service to himself rather than a reciprocal union between two equal beings.⁶⁵ Plaskow reinforces the account of Lilith fleeing the garden as in the ABS, and then introduces Eve, a more suitable companion for Adam:

For a time Eve and Adam had a good thing going. Adam was happy now, and Eve, though she occasionally sensed capacities within herself that remained undeveloped, was basically satisfied with the role of Adam’s wife and helper. The only thing that really disturbed her was the excluding closeness of the relationship between Adam and God.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Plaskow, 1972.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Here Plaskow inserts her own understanding and experience of women's exclusion from formal Jewish religious institutions with this allegory describing the close relationship Adam has in his communications with the Divine, a relationship with which neither Lilith nor Eve can engage. Eve grows to recognize that her previous conceptions of Lilith were tainted by Adam's characterization of Lilith as a "fearsome" demon, and seeks out a more personal relationship with her. The two women, longing for a sisterly bond, end up finding meaning in each other's company partly due to this exclusion from the androcentric relationship between Adam and God. If the relationship between Adam and God represents an allegory for the patriarchy and the patriarchal traditions within the Jewish religion, this brand new interpretation of Genesis in which Eve allies with Lilith represents a call for Jewish women to strategize obtaining social and political power in Jewish spaces. They are ready to return to the garden and "rebuild it together."⁶⁷ A more literal understanding would also prompt Jewish women to literally reconnect with the Lilith-figure in new ways, which definitely resonated with a number of Jewish women in the decades following her article.

"The Coming of Lilith" does not, however, present as a reliable academic source for a few reasons. For one, its format does not indicate a close analysis into a particular text but rather reimagines existing biblical text. It presents as a retelling of Genesis which some have argued qualifies Plaskow's work as a modern midrash.⁶⁸ Given its format as a reimagining of Genesis, with additional details added to complement a new interpretation, and with the writing's widespread reception giving it a degree of authority, I would agree that it indeed presents itself as a modern midrash, focusing on themes related to women's unity against

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Diamantopoulou 2017, 35.

patriarchy. While “The Coming of Lilith” may constitute a modern midrash, I remain curious as to how this text may or may not reconcile with the Jewish women’s traditional understanding of the Lilith myth.

“THE LILITH QUESTION”

These early articles published in *Lilith* magazine apparently did not aspire to be the most academic pieces of writing, but its accessible content clearly resonated with many women, reflecting a more emotional appeal to the themes of the revived Lilith myth than a critical one. *Lilith* magazine represents one of the most obvious signs that Lilith’s public image underwent a serious remodel in the 1970’s. The publication’s mission is as follows:

Independent, Jewish & frankly feminist since 1976, Lilith’s mission is to be the feminist change-agent in and for the Jewish community: amplifying Jewish feminist voices, creating an inclusive and positive Judaism, spurring gender consciousness in the Jewish world and empowering women, girls and trans and nonbinary people of every background to envision and enact change in their own lives and the larger community.⁶⁹

At its peak, *Lilith* readership was estimated at twenty-five thousand readers, and to this day it continues to focus on Jewish women’s religious and social issues, carrying on a legacy that began in 1976.⁷⁰

To better understand the impressions Lilith magazine intended to make unto its earliest readers, one should take a look at its premier September 1976 issue. Scholarship on Lilith content continues to cite the essay from this issue by Aviva Cantor titled, “The Lilith Question.” I analyze this article on its own and also as a foundational Lilith revival text. This essay effectively establishes the choice for Lilith as namesake of this feminist publication,

⁶⁹ Cantor, 1976.

⁷⁰ Jewish Women’s Archive. “Lilith Magazine.” Accessed January 26, 2022.

indicating the underlying understanding of what Lilith represents or grew to represent to Jewish feminists especially in the 1970's.

Cantor begins with a brief excerpt of the Lilith myth from the ABS, followed by Genesis 1:27, "And God created the human species in His own image... male and female created He them." After providing the context of her origins, Cantor then analyzes Lilith's character and how that character has been understood throughout Jewish history, arguing that men have slandered Lilith's character because they feared her power. She also argues that modern readers should consider a more forgiving rereading of Lilith as Jewish tradition has forgiven the negative traits in male figures or role models. Cantor's rhetoric throughout the article indicates her understanding of Lilith's character as that of a role model to whom women, and particularly feminists, should aspire. Looking at the first sentence of the third paragraph of the essay demonstrates the extent to which Cantor's language pushes a specific portrayal of Lilith's character and how that character, in Cantor's perspective, has been misunderstood or slandered.

Jewish tradition **characterized** Lilith after her escape from Adam as a demon and **embellished** this reputation with legend upon legend of her vengeful activities to harm children and women who give birth in rooms without **industrial-strength** amulets to ward her off.⁷¹

Cantor first states that "Jewish tradition characterized Lilith...as a demon," rather than stating that she is one. Does this imply that Cantor does not view her as a demon? Or rather, is Cantor unconcerned with whether or not Lilith holds demon status because Cantor's focus on Lilith in her work is more focused on Lilith as a literary figure than as a threatening

⁷¹ Cantor, 1976. I embolden specific words and phrases which indicate Cantor's biases and understanding of the Lilith myth.

entity? The use of “characterized” here also implies that *what* Lilith is at her core is open to interpretation. And while legends absolutely evolve over time, questioning or excluding Lilith’s identity as a demon had not been considered, or at the very least documented, from any other time in Jewish history. Cantor’s comment that Lilith’s reputation may have been “embellished” implies that her most egregious behavior later, like baby-killing, came from later legends outside of her origin story. Though later legends added smaller details unto her narrative, the ABS, which Cantor cites, explicitly includes an assertion of Lilith’s destiny to murder babies. Cantor’s comment regarding “industrial strength” might hint at Lilith’s power, or perhaps that people chose to seek protection with tools that may have worked but may not have been entirely necessary. While it is true that generally childbirth amulets must prove to be effective and be made by a reputable creator, this language and the entire phrasing of this one sentence establishes Cantor’s personal perspective of the myth as one in which Lilith’s reputation is at the very least unreflective of her entire character, and at most, slanderous and demonizing. But is it fair to say that Jewish patriarchy has “demonized” a figure that has been understood as a literal demon for most of her history? I continue this discussion later in this chapter.

Cantor lists a number of aspects of “the Lilith question,” including:

Should we forget her revolt because of her later (alleged!) crimes and thus reject her; or should we forget her later crimes and focus only on her revolt because only this is significant; or do both parts have value for us?⁷²

Why include “(alleged!)” at all? It can serve Cantor’s argument that a modern reader, especially a Jewish feminist one, may benefit from looking at this Jewish anti-role model from a new perspective, an argument with which I do not disagree. However, I question the

⁷² Ibid.

extent to which this rhetoric seeks out the positive attributes of Lilith, and erases the centuries of Jewish history in which Lilith was objectively understood as harmful to Jewish women and babies, and by extension the survival of the Jewish people as a whole. The widespread use of childbirth amulets demonstrates the very real desire for protection against what was understood as a very real physical danger. The lack of extensive research and literature on the widespread use of childbirth amulets by Jewish women may partially explain one of the reasons why this kind of rhetoric was able to blossom beginning in the 1970's, but newer research on amulets as primary evidence for widespread belief in a dangerous Lilith demon can help us to balance out these perspectives.

Cantor later includes a series of objectively positive characterizations describing Lilith:

“She is courageous and decisive, willing to accept the consequences of her action. Her strength of character and commitment to self is inspiring.”

“Lilith is a powerful female. She radiates strength, assertiveness; she refuses to cooperate in her own victimization.”⁷³

Language that asserts she “is” or “does” pushes Cantor’s point forward, but leaves little room for critical analysis. While Cantor refers to Lilith as the “only important negative female role model invented by Jews,” Cantor’s own characterization reveals that she does not believe Lilith should be seen as a negative role model at all, contradicting the role the Rabbis assigned her.⁷⁴ In this way, both Cantor and Plaskow depict a Lilith which they believe has been misrepresented throughout Jewish history, apparently on the basis of their own understanding of contemporary gender and sexual politics. Other feminist scholars who took

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

inspiration from Plaskow and Cantor demonstrate the impact these two individual scholars made on Lilith revival Literature as a whole.

OTHER LILITH REVIVAL LITERATURE

Since the 1970's but especially over the last twenty five years or so, growing interest in the Lilith narrative presents itself in expanding academic literature. A number of texts drew inspiration from the Lilith revival, beginning first with Jocelyn Hellig's 1998 article. Hellig explores the origin and function of Lilith in terms of Judaism's gender construction arguing that, "Lilith functions as a projection of yearning and an outlet for anxiety. She, however, can also constitute a role model for modern-day Jewish feminists."⁷⁵ Hellig pulls from Cantor's work in many regards, but contributes her argument that the aforementioned anxieties likely revolve around reproduction and fertility. But how have these anxieties evolved over time?

Hellig answers the question of what anxieties initially inspired Lilith's invention by listing her dominant attributes:

- a. She is, on the one hand, a seductress who leads unsuspecting men into sin by tempting them in their sleep.
 - b. On the other hand, she is a vengeful, evil witch who destroys infants.
- In both these roles, which evolved separately in Jewish folk tales, she saps and threatens life. Seldom does she fulfill both roles simultaneously. In both negative forms she is the epitome of malecreated feminine threat.⁷⁶

Hellig also names Lilith's more powerful attributes—*independent, assertive, responsible*—and uses these traits to claim she is the "epitome of the modern feminist ideal."⁷⁷ I would critique

⁷⁵ Hellig, 1998, 36.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

the idea that she embodies the feminist ideal if, as Hellig writes, both negative and positive attributes are simultaneously true. Hellig argues that men constructed the Lilith narrative during the Exile based on their anxieties about gender and power in the diaspora, and that the narrative went on to reinforce the way Jewish men viewed Jewish women for generations, with the negative traits overshadowing the positive. If both exist simultaneously, this would mean that Lilith still preys on men sexually, using their emissions to spawn her demon children, and aspires to kill human infants, but at least she does so independently and assertively. I am not primarily concerned with whether or not Lilith is a feminist. Numerous scholars have approached this question, though few if any have compared the public reception of Lilith from Revival literature with the traditional understanding of her character throughout the majority of her history.

While Hellig acknowledges the historical moment in which the Lilith myth was born, with high anxieties about gender and power in the Exilic period, Kohenet Grenn has a much more contemporary focus on the place of Lilith within Jewish spirituality. Grenn advocates envisioning the Divine as female on the grounds that this can be liberatory within women's spirituality, and discusses Lilith in terms of the Divine.⁷⁸ Grenn describes Lilith as Goddess almost immediately, not necessarily building an argument to support this claim but rather using this idea as support for her other arguments. Grenn uniquely views Lilith as a spiritual entity, though one that has been and continues to be misconstrued. Citing other scholars who describe Lilith as the Creatrix turned by the Patriarchy into the Destroyer, Grenn argues that any woman open about her sexuality and autonomy could be demonized in the ways the patriarchy has demonized Lilith.⁷⁹ Where Grenn finds evidence of Lilith's role as Creatrix

⁷⁸ Grenn 2007, 38.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 43.

remains unclear. Interestingly, Grenn contrasts the “dominant, misogynistic image of Lilith as murderer, succubus, and night hag” with “her roles as a free thinker and one who protects women who cannot defend themselves.”⁸⁰ For Lilith to evolve in the span of a few decades from being highly recognized as a demon who brought illness unto babies and threatened the lives of infants and their mothers to one who protects women is a remarkably dramatic shift.

Grenn claims that some women may have prayed to Lilith as a female deity who could protect them during childbirth, and cites but two books to support this claim, the first described as “an inspiring and practical guide for awakening women's shamanic healing powers to heal ourselves and our planet,” a book focused on shamanic healing written by feminist and shamanic healer Vicki Noble, and the second focusing on representations of the Goddess in Western culture from art historian Elinor Gadon. Noble’s book does not present itself as historical but rather a guidebook, and while Gadon’s book includes a more thorough methodological approach, her focus is not exclusively on Lilith, nor does she prioritize arguing that Lilith is Goddess, instead evaluating images resembling Lilith and drawing connections to other representations of the broad Goddess figure. These two citations do not provide sufficient evidence to support Grenn’s claim that Lilith was at one point widely believed by female practitioners to be a protector of women. Furthermore, scholars like Rabbi Dr. Geoffrey Dennis point out that claims about Lilith as Goddess are modern constructs, and that prior to the ABS narrative around the 10th century CE, there is no evidence for belief in Lilith as Goddess or as “Wife of YHVH.”⁸¹ It may be possible that some women looked to Lilith as a protector of women within an isolated historical context, but there is not sufficient evidence to support this claim nor to construct other arguments

⁸⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁸¹ Dennis 2007, 436.

about how Lilith's character was manipulated by the patriarchy from a positive entity into a negative one. Though women may now find meaning and value in Lilith as Goddess, to claim that this was always the case would be ahistorical and neglect the perspectives of women who certainly did view Lilith in a negative light.

I would not be the first to critique the methods through which contemporary Lilith revival scholars have compiled their evidence or structured their arguments. Pinelopi Diamantopoulou compares a number of essays depicting Lilith within Jewish feminism using historical criticism, literary criticism, and cultural criticism, also drawing attention to Plaskow as a foundational text. One critique of "The Coming of Lilith" questions Plaskow's use of the ABS as her main source, especially after translating it herself to justify her perspective.⁸² This is a valid critique, as are many of Diamantopoulou's critiques of other scholars. However, critiquing methodologies may not be an appropriate approach to work like Plaskow's, which, though foundational to Lilith revival literature, is ultimately more literary than research-based.

CONCLUSION

Lilith revival literature, then, is made up of various kinds of sources ranging from academic journal articles, magazine articles, art analysis, fiction, and literary work that borders on fiction such as Plaskow's modern midrash. But how does the new expanse of literature impact the Lilith figure herself? With a few exceptions, the majority of Lilith scholars began writing about this figure not as an entity, as she was understood for thousands of years, but rather as a literary character, an archetype, or a symbol for their social and

⁸² Diamantopoulou 2017, 50.

spiritual desires in a contemporary world. As discussed above, the allegorical components of “The Coming of Lilith,” with Adam representing patriarchy as a whole and Eve and Lilith representing different approaches to womanhood, were also very much present in “The Lilith Question” as well. The way Cantor describes Lilith as a hodge podge of negative traits” demonstrates her understanding of an ancient version of Lilith as a character inherently misunderstood and manipulated by the Rabbis, but still a character nonetheless.⁸³ Many of the themes addressed in these sources prompt a number of questions about the perceived reality of myths and legends. What makes a myth real? What makes a spiritual entity or deity real? Is it related to length of time or popularity? What is the difference between a fictional story of Lilith and the ABS?

Of course, myths constantly evolve and resonate differently within each respective historical context. Therefore there is no “correct” version of the Lilith figure, regardless of whether or not she is a tangible entity or a literary character. Because these sources so greatly influence the popular understanding of Lilith, they have arguably transformed what Lilith *is* in the modern world.

One way this manifests itself is in the popular rhetoric about the ways in which Lilith’s story has been manipulated into one in which she is the antagonist because she exhibits behaviors which threaten patriarchal social structures. The implication that Lilith was undoubtedly a goddess figure manipulated by the patriarchy into a figure feared and scorned by naive Jewish women who didn’t know any better lacks sufficient nuance by dismissing Jewish women's ability to interact with the entity in a way that made sense to them. It also avoids the fact that deities and mythological entities can shift over time to the

⁸³ Cantor, 1976.

point where a supernatural entity in the 11th century CE is completely different from the one that may have originated in ancient Sumeria or in Babylon between the 3rd and the 1st millennium BC. Often Lilith is described in contemporary literature as being villainized or demonized, and while her behaviors are generally pretty villainous, is it possible to demonize a demon?

Is it the Rabbis who have misinterpreted Lilith's character, or could the same be said of the feminists who reinterpret her character in a positive light today? Neither answer is more correct than the other, but I want to draw attention back to the women whose understanding of the Lilith myth has not been documented or preserved through personal accounts or essays analyzing how her character resonates with them. Jewish women who utilized childbirth amulets for nearly a thousand years clearly did so for a reason, and the contents of the amulets demonstrate the anxieties that plagued expectant and new mothers. Their anxieties, based on this evidence, revolved around a sense of lacking control over what would happen to their bodies and their lives regarding reproduction, issuing a desire for autonomy regarding their physical health, being a good mother, and ensuring the continuation of the Jewish people.

Why is there even a question now about what "we" as Jewish feminist should do now, reject or forget? What changed that Jewish women even considered reimagining Lilith? Lilith Revival literature often assumes that she is at the very least misunderstood and at most a feminist icon, literally demonized by the evil that is the patriarchy. Here, her character is entirely different, but I posit that this shift comes from certain anxieties of Jewish women as well. In this instance, those anxieties are much more related to patriarchy, autonomy regarding sexual freedom and equality, and rethinking the Jewish tradition in a way that is

more inclusive of women in order to adapt to the modern world. In this sense, the anxieties expressed by Jewish women are indeed quite similar, indicating that interacting with the Lilith myth has served similar functions throughout Jewish history. Cantor mentions that anxieties surrounding the continuation of the Jewish people in Exile were partly to blame for the dispersal of the original Lilith myth, and as Jewish people reevaluate what Judaism is and should be in the modern world, so too have myths adapted to fit new communal desires.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of how she has been understood throughout Jewish history, Lilith continues to take up a prominent space in Jewish women's consciousness. This is clearly supported by the continuation of literature on Lilith that began in the 1970's, reflecting on what her place in Jewish life today ought to look like. The impact of early feminist scholars of Lilith cannot be overstated in terms of how reimagining the Lilith myth also allowed for a reimagining of women's engagement in traditional Jewish liturgical settings. However, I remain critical of how this literature has fallen flat in recognizing the experiences and perspectives of the Jewish women who would not have likely imagined looking to Lilith for guidance or inspiration for how to strengthen their connection to Jewish womanhood. The women who initially sought protection from Lilith using childbirth amulets sought to connect to their Jewish womanhood by ensuring the continuation of a strong Jewish people, so they took the steps that were available to them to ensure their children survived infancy. In the twenty-first century, Jewish women are more concerned with depictions of women in scripture and folklore to understand where their place in Jewish religious life was and ought to be. These are equally important concerns, but they do result in dramatically different understandings of how women ought to interact with the Lilith myth.

This thesis began with addressing the absence of sufficient literature on Lilith that acknowledges the vastly different perspectives of Jewish women from the Middle Ages to twentieth and twenty-first century feminists. Using childbirth amulets as primary evidence for early constructions of Lilith as a demon, this research suggested that when the Lilith myth first circulated widely in the Middle Ages, Lilith was understood by Jewish women as the primary underlying cause of bodily harm during childbirth during the first days of an infant's

life. By analyzing Lilith revival literature, chapter three demonstrated that contemporary literature on Lilith is not concerned with Lilith as a corporeal entity who can affect the health of mothers and infants, but instead interests itself with what she represents and what value that representation has for Jewish women today.

Discussions about Lilith's place in contemporary religious life may call back to ongoing non-scholarly but prevalent conversations that have been taking place in online circles about the origins of Lilith and whether or not that means pagan Lilith-worship is appropriated from Judaism. These discussions continue to occur without reaching strong conclusions, indicating that content creators are focusing on asking the wrong questions; why are pagans interested in Lilith-worship in the first place? When did this start? If it is a modern phenomenon, why now? Interest in these questions may be tied to a resurgence in New Age spirituality coinciding with the feminist reinterpretations of the Lilith myth that continue to present day. While I would argue that these conversations also neglect bringing into context the lengths Jewish women have gone to for hundreds of years to protect against Lilith, they do call for further research on this topic. Similarly, questions that might be asked concerning the impact of Lilith revival literature are also worth investigating with regards to the extent to which it may have impacted the inclusion of female clergy within Jewish movements. Other areas for further research would include further attention to the earlier ideas of how Lilith has influenced archetypes of motherhood in the Jewish tradition and the extent to which midwives reinforced using childbirth amulets. I hope that this thesis draws attention to the lack of research on childbirth amulets, especially from the perspectives of the mothers that utilized them, so that in the future we can benefit from understanding what our foremothers experienced in bringing generations of children into the world.

So what are the implications of this figure changing so drastically in the consciousness of Jewish women? Of course, entities like demons or deities evolve over time and shift to fit their respective cultural and historical contexts. But I am particularly concerned with how the interests of the Jewish women shape this dynamic mythology around Lilith. Of course the transition into modernity is a huge reason behind why these priorities shifted. But the social and political desires of women have likewise shifted as well. As technology has improved over the last several hundred years and infant mortality rates have dropped, childbirth has become less associated with life and death while allowing more room for concern about, say, healthier parenting strategies. In the beginning of this thesis I wondered how women have survived and thrived while birthing countless generations of Jewish people, and I think Lilith has played a role in both. By using childbirth amulets and doing what they feasibly could to prevent harm to their infant children, Jewish mothers took agency over this transition into motherhood to secure the following generations of Jewish people. More recently, by seeing in Lilith an archetype of Jewish womanhood that is independent from men and more concerned with sexual liberation and sisterhood, Jewish women can thrive and adapt their Judaism in ways that were not previously possible at any stage in Jewish history.

Glossary

Alphabet of Ben Sira (ABS) - Falsely attributed to second century sage Ben Sira, this text included the first comprehensive narrative of the Lilith myth which began to circulate in 8th century CE. Though its multiple sections satirize Jewish prophets and were met with harsh criticisms, the ABS and especially its folkloric elements became generally accepted within midrashic tradition.

Amulet - Objects that are “believed to have special beneficial powers, such as the power to protect against misfortune and danger, to heal, to calm a stormy sea, or to increase a person’s success in business. When issued by a religious expert to secure divine blessing in human affairs, it becomes a theurgical tool and an object that has religious importance because it is associated with holiness”⁸⁴

Apotropaic - Possessing the power to avert evil influences

Lilith Revival - the contemporary literature and media depicting and discussing the Lilith myth, reinventing it to fit in with the needs of the modern era

Mezuzot - (singular: *mezuzah*) A piece of parchment inscribed with verses from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 and contained in a decorative case. *Mezuzot* are secured on the doorposts of Jewish homes to fulfill the Biblical commandment to "write the words of God on the gates and doorposts of your house" (Deut. 6:9)

Niddah - The laws of menstruation

Sympathetic magic - The protective powers transferred to someone from an object associated with holiness

⁸⁴ Klein, 2013, 26

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